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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 HARARE 000626

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/30/2019
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [OEXC](#) [KPAO](#) [ZI](#)
SUBJECT: BBC AND CNN ALLOWED BACK IN ZIMBABWE, BUT KEPT ON
SHORT LEASH

Classified By: CDA Katherine Dhanani for reason 1.4 (b)

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) After an eight-year ban, in an effort to help repair the country's battered image, the ZANU-PF led Ministry of Media, Information and Publicity (MMIP) has given permission to the BBC and CNN to report from within Zimbabwe. A BBC crew has been openly reporting from Zimbabwe since July 25, but has been closely shadowed by security officers. Separately, the ministry has encouraged -- but not granted a license to -- an independent publisher to begin production of a daily newspaper to compete with the State-controlled mouthpieces, The Herald in Harare and Chronicle in Bulawayo. Media and civic society observers believe the seeming media relaxation is disingenuous and is merely an attempt to portray ZANU-PF in a reformist light and encourage international engagement and investment. The GOZ's sincerity about media freedom will quickly be tested as the BBC and CNN are intent on avoiding manipulation. END SUMMARY.

Is This What Media Freedom Looks Like?

¶2. (C) Firlie Davies of the BBC's Johannesburg bureau is leading a small team of three to four journalists that since July 25 has been reporting on a variety of Zimbabwean issues from within the country, including the performance of the inclusive government, rule of law, and land reform. Davies told us that their visit had been approved by Webster Shamu, the Minister of Media, Information and Publicity (MMIP), and George Charamba, the Ministry's Permanent Secretary. Davies suspected the approval ultimately came because BBC said that their plan was to report on national reconciliation issues.

¶3. (SBU) In letters to both media organizations reflecting

recent discussions within the Ministry, the government officials somewhat absurdly contended that CNN and BBC had never been banned. The letter to the BBC reads: "For the purposes of the record, I restate the main points of our meeting. We acknowledged the need to put behind us the mutually ruinous relationship of the past."

¶4. (C) Despite the positive tone, the Ministry appears intent on controlling the reporting activities of the BBC team, according to Davies. Since their arrival, they have had two known Central Intelligence Organization (CIO) handlers present at all times. Additionally, Davies has been receiving threatening phone calls and text messages that she assumes are from the CIO.

¶5. (C) Davies was doubtful the arrangement would last long and cited a heated argument that erupted during an interview with ZANU-PF National Chairman John Nkomo on July 28 where the CIO handlers began shouting that the BBC team would interview who they (the CIO) wanted and on issues of which they approved. Davies made clear that the BBC was not Qthey approved. Davies made clear that the BBC was not interested in being manipulated by the government.

¶6. (C) Kim Norgaard of CNN's Johannesburg bureau confirmed on July 29 that he had met with Shamu and Charamba in person last week and had also been told that CNN was welcome to report from Zimbabwe and had never been banned. Norgaard was told that CNN would have to register with the MMIP prior to entering the country, but his plan was to inform them upon arrival. Norgaard did not indicate when CNN would arrive,

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and said that most likely they would merely maintain local correspondents rather than opening a Harare-based bureau. For controversial stories, CNN would bring in a foreign correspondent to mitigate the risk of intimidation of local staff. He said that any attempts by the State to intimidate them or limit their reporting would become part of the story.

Media Ministry Encourages Independent Daily

¶7. (C) In another indication that the MMIP is rethinking its strategy regarding independent media, the ministry recently encouraged independent publisher Zimind to begin publication of a daily newspaper. Trevor Ncube, the CEO of Zimind -- publishers of The Zimbabwe Independent and The Standard -- said that he had a meeting with Shamu and Charamba on July 24 during which he was told that he could submit an application allowing the formation of his proposed daily newspaper, NewsDay. Shamu told him he had checked with Attorney General Johannes Tomana, who verified that the application and subsequent newspaper would be legal, even though the regulatory Media Commission was still being formed by Parliament. Ncube told us his lawyers had advised him there was no legal impediment to publishing -- a license or official approval was not necessary -- but that he probably would not publish unless he gets some kind of government approval such as written authorization from the MMIP. Another potential new newspaper, the Evening Gazette, claims it was awarded a license late last year from the now defunct Media and Information Commission. The Evening Gazette is backed by Reserve Bank governor Gideon Gono, who also owns a stake in the weekly Financial Gazette.

Civil Society and Journalists Highly Skeptical

¶8. (C) There is considerable skepticism from civil society members and journalists about the sincerity of officials at the MMIP to free up media space. Takura Zhangazha, the director of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), an NGO that promotes media freedoms across the southern Africa

region, viewed these initial steps as "playing to the gallery" and designed to give the impression that ZANU-PF was pro-reform. He also viewed it as an effort to improve the country's image and attract international investment. He suspected that the tenures of BBC and CNN would be short-lived once they began publishing or broadcasting critical pieces. Davies and Norgaard agreed and believed that the Ministry thought they could control the international press outlets by only accrediting local journalists who might be more susceptible to intimidation.

Few Appicants for Media Commission
QFew Applicants for Media Commission

¶9. (C) As called for in the Global Political Agreement (GPA), Parliament is in the process of selecting candidates for the Media, Human Rights, Anti-Corruption, and Electoral commissions. Xolani Zitha, the Director of the Speaker's Office in Parliament, told poloff that the media commission was suffering from a lack of pro-democracy candidates due to MISA's boycotting of the process. Zitha said that Parliament only had 24 applications for that commission while some of the other commissions had in excess of two hundred candidates.

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COMMENT

¶10. (C) After years of media repression and biased State-controlled reporting, we are also highly skeptical of what superficially appear to be steps towards promoting media freedoms. Two days after the BBC crew entered the country, President Robert Mugabe, while in Uganda attending the Smart Partnership Dialogue, resumed his attack on the BBC and CNN. The State-controlled New Vision in Uganda reported that he questioned the two media groups, impartiality. Mugabe's criticism of media is usually succeeded by stringent controls.

¶11. (C) If BBC and CNN are allowed to establish correspondents, we suspect only local journalists will be accredited, they will be closely monitored, and will be subject to intimidation and harassment. If they portray ZANU-PF in a negative light, they will likely be charged criminally and their outlets banned. END COMMENT.

DHANANI